

Wellness Notes

Smell*

(Part III)

Symptoms and Diagnosis

There are several types of smell disorders depending on how the sense of smell is affected. People who have smell disorders experience either a loss in their ability to smell or changes in the way they perceive odors.

Some people have hyposmia, which occurs when their ability to detect odor is reduced. This smell disorder is common in people who have upper respiratory infections or nasal congestion. This is usually temporary and goes away when the infection clears up.

Other people can't detect odor at all, which is called anosmia. This type of smell disorder is sometimes the result of head trauma, usually from an automobile accident. It can sometimes be caused by aging. In rare cases, anosmia is inherited.

Sometimes a loss of smell can be accompanied by a change in the perception of odors. This type of smell disorder is called dysosmia. Familiar odors may become distorted, or an odor that usually smells pleasant instead smells foul. Sometimes people with this type of smell disorder also experience headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath, or anxiety.

Still others may perceive a smell that isn't present at all, which is called phantosmia.

If you think you have a problem with your sense of smell, try to identify and record the circumstances surrounding it. Ask yourself the following questions:

- When did I first become aware of it?
- Did I have a cold or the flu?
- Did I have a head injury?

Ask yourself these questions:

- Was I exposed to air pollutants, pollens, danders, or dust to which I might be allergic?
- Is this a recurring problem?
- Does it come at any special time, like during the hayfever season?

Bring this information with you when you visit your physician. Also, be prepared to tell him about your general health and any medications you are taking. The correct diagnosis by a trained health professional can provide reassurance that your problem with smell is not imaginary.

If you think you have a smell disorder, see your doctor. Diagnosis of a smell disorder is important because once the cause is found your doctor may be able to treat your smell disorder. Many types of smell problems are reversible.